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REWRITING HIS LIFE'S SCRIPT

AT 13, HE PLEADED HIS CASE TO A JUVENILE JUDGE: PLEASE GET ME OUT OF CABRINI. AT 17, HE'S MADE THE MOST OF THAT OPPORTUNITY.

When Marcello Robinson was 13, he and three friends would stare out The 7th-floor windows of their Cabrini-Green apartments and watch gang members show off their fancy cars, deal drugs at the corner, and scurry away at the sight of police.

The boys had cemented a friendship amid the gloom of their situation and made an informal pact. "We were like, 'Man, we'll never do that. We'll come back here someday and help out,'" Robinson said.

In fact, Robinson became so desperate that he pleaded with state child-welfare officials to take custody of him. And in an unusual move, a judge agreed to make him a ward of the state.

Four years later, Robinson, 17, is senior class president at Hersey High School, a budding actor who elicits occasional shrieks of recognition for his America Online commercials, and is well on his way to making good on the pact.

He has done it with no support from his parents--or even those early friends--but with help from a lot of people who believe in him. He has not received a birthday card from his mother in four years and has spoken to his father only a handful of times in his life. He lives in a state home in Des Plaines.

But Karen DiVito, whose son has become friends with Robinson at Hersey, has hosted him many weekends in the family's Arlington Heights townhouse.

"When I think of Marcello, I think of an old man in a young man's body," she said. "He's tremendously focused. I admire his determination because it comes from within."

Six months ago, Robinson visited his old neighborhood in the Chicago Housing Authority development, and what he found shocked him. While his mother is straightening up after years of drug abuse, his friends had become everything they despised in grade school. "I couldn't believe it. They're all in gangs. They all smoke marijuana. They dropped out in their junior year," he said. Or maybe he's not so surprised.

More than once, his mother has asked him to return home and has threatened to challenge his placement at Maryville Academy in Des Plaines. But each time, Robinson would insist that he's better off now and his mother would fail to show in court.

"I'm learning from a lot of people's mistakes," said Robinson, whose mother was 14 when he was born, the first of 11 children. "I've seen what can happen."

He's determined, say those who know him, to follow his dream of becoming an actor, TV talk show host or radio broadcaster. "This may sound crazy," he says, "but I feel like there's a plan for me." Those who've guided him see it, too.

"He's been through an enormous miserable time," said Dan Lane , 51, a Palatine businessman and mentor to Robinson. "He's been through some awful things and was pushed around an awful lot by grown-ups. In effect, his choice was to either go back to Cabrini and the family ties and pulls, wacky as they are, or to give that all up and move in with strangers, essentially. Maryville is a nice place but it's rather cold. "In his view, there was no choice."

Lane was a volunteer tutor at Cabrini when he met Robinson, then in 4th grade. Over the years, he has helped direct the young man, bringing him home for weekends and once for a few months. He found him street smart but naive.

Robinson was astounded to see Lane pay by credit card for gasoline at the pump. He was accustomed to seeing cash exchanged before any services were delivered.

"The same thing happened at a restaurant," Lane said. "I got him this big giant sundae. There was something--like, you got the food but didn't pay for it on the spot. He was not used to the fact that people behaved civilly with an understanding that people trust you and trust me."

By the time he was 13, Robinson was missing weeks of school at a time to baby-sit seven of his siblings in their five-bedroom Cabrini apartment. If his mother hadn't returned by 6 p.m., he would find something to cook--chicken, spaghetti or rice.

Cynthia Fitzpatrick, principal at Von Schiller School, where Robinson Attended through 8th grade, said she talked to the boy's mother about his absences. Still, the mother would often come in the middle of the day to take him home to baby-sit.

But "he was always driven. He didn't seem to let the environment bother him. You could tell he liked fine arts. He's a very personable young man," Fitzpatrick said.

One day, a social worker visited the apartment to check out a neglect complaint. The worker found a grandmother home with eight children, but their mother was on drugs, the apartment was infested with cockroaches and there was no food, according to a report dated July 8, 1996, prepared by Lutheran Social Services for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Robinson told the worker he was unhappy and wanted out, despite being told he was old enough to remain at home with his mother.

Cook County Public Guardian Patrick Murphy said Robinson's request was not so surprising--other children have voiced a desire to leave such circumstances. But the fact that his request was accommodated was highly unusual, Murphy said.

"DCFS would just as soon see the kid stay at home," he said. "The judge was very impressed with him. He was taking care of all these kids and was a straight-A student."

His potential to excel if removed from Cabrini-Green is what drove then-Juvenile Court Judge Martha A. Mills to approve his move (the namee as published has been corrected in this text). DCFS would not comment on Robinson's case.

"His choice was, is he going to stay there and try to save these kids and be a parent, or save himself?" Lane said. "I told him, 'You can't do all this.' It's like being on the Titanic and there are only so many lifeboats."

Robinson, who later struggled with mixed feelings over leaving, would draw on a single recollection of Cabrini for assurance that he had made

the right decision. He and a friend were sitting on the 7th-floor "ramp" or balcony outside their apartment, watching a gang fight below. "All of a sudden a guy came out in the hallway and pulled a gun on us. He asked if we were in the gang. We thought he was a gang member," Robinson said.

He turned out to be a police officer. "I had never been frightened that bad in my life," Robinson said.

But adjusting to a new life was not trouble-free either. Arriving at Maryville during his freshman year, Robinson was sulky and refused to follow directions, such as taking out the garbage or washing dishes. "At my home, I was more of the adult," he said. "I didn't have to answer to anybody."

He lived in the most restrictive section of Maryville, where teens are observed for psychological or behavioral problems for six months. Staff members pulled Robinson aside on more than one occasion and reminded him that he had to abide by their rules.

"When he came, one of the things we said was, 'God gave you some talents. Use them or lose them,' " said Rev. John Smyth, the academy's executive director. "With that voice, he came to church and started reading." He sings baritone/bass in the choir.

Robinson has struggled with his grades off and on, and he currently ranks in the middle of his class with a C-plus average, said Karen Smith, a Hersey guidance counselor.

"Part of the academic deficiency and gaps have come from the constant turmoil in his life," she said. "But he's had good attendance. That's what happens, when they become a ward of the state, their lives stabilize."

Within months of starting school, he had joined the student council, successfully auditioned for his first play and served as president of the African-American club, Kujenga. He also has served as president of his junior and senior classes.

This year, he has packed his course schedule, leaving no official time for lunch (one teacher allows him a 15-minute break to go to the cafeteria). Play rehearsals take up his time after school, and then he works two evenings a week at a mortgage company, returning to Maryville by 9:30 p.m. The Doc Martens shoes and Abercrombie & Fitch clothes he

wears come from his earnings, and he says he sometimes wishes his classmates recognized that he has no wealthy parents paying his way.

To follow his dream, Robinson did his research and found an agency, McBlaine & Associates in Park Ridge, to help him get work, then used more of his earnings to hire a portfolio photographer. (this paragraph as published has been corrected in this text.)

Maryville staff members drive him to appointments and help him memorize his lines, said Angela Zinzer, who works at the home Robinson shares with eight other teenage boys. "He's just an average kid who has a lot of activities and a different motivation," she said. "We try to provide a normal life for him."

Talent agent Paige Ehlman said she noticed from the start that Robinson always enters the agency alone and is nicely dressed. "Most of the actors we have are with the typical stage moms who follow them around," she said. "He's always on his own. He seems comfortable with just about anybody."

Robinson has appeared in background scenes of "Never Been Kissed," "Return to Me," "Light It Up," and "Message in a Bottle," during which he was promoted to a bit part as a pie-thrower.

In January, he was cast in the lead role of Jim in the Huckleberry Finn story "Big River," an all-state theatrical production at Illinois State University. He was among 45 students chosen out of the 300 who auditioned.

"I think his motivation comes from he knows where he came from and he doesn't want that," said Pam Jones, a Hersey counselor who sponsors the Kujenga club.

He talks little about his past to friends. "He's had a hard background. Why bring up the bad things?" said Mike Puzen, 17, a senior. "He made a name for himself on his own. He has an idea, he acts on the idea. He's not afraid to try something different."

But he's also a stickler for finishing projects. Adam Ruch, a senior, remembers a school dance during their sophomore year. "We hadn't sold tickets yet—it was our first day for ticket sales--and he gets worried it won't be a success," Ruch said. By the last day, tickets were sold out.

Now, Robinson is penciling in the next steps in his life. He hopes to

be accepted by the University of California at Los Angeles. The state will pay his full tuition, but officials said that wards usually stay closer to home because of the mandate for a mentor to oversee their progress.

In Robinson's case, however, they're hoping to find a mentor in California. Robinson has noted in his calendar that he will graduate June 5, and he intends to be on his way to California four days later. Reflecting on his life, he concludes, "I haven't changed. I'm the same Marcello I was in Cabrini. I think I'll always be the same person."

Captions: PHOTOS (color): Hersey High senior Marcello Robinson, 17, gets in costume (above) for his lead role as Jim in ``Big River.'' Most days, the actor and class president gets up at 6 a.m. to iron his school clothes (below). Tribune photos by George Thompson.

PHOTOS: Marcello Robinson, described by friends and mentors as ``driven,'' brings a senior class council meeting to order (left) at Hersey High School. A class leader since his arrival at Hersey, Robinson also has single-handedly found an agent and begun an acting career (below). Tribune photos by George Thompson.